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Army Corps likes C&D Canal park idea

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Congressman Mike Castle has a vision for the Chesapeake and Delaware Canal, where residents would go there to fish, hunt, ride their bikes, walk along the canal banks and watch the ships pass by.

It's true, you can do all of these things already. But you can't go to a civilized bathroom, park your car in a parking lot, ride a road bike along the dirt or gravel roads along the canal banks, use rollerblades, or sit on a park bench. Plus, Castle said, hardly anybody knows the

thousands of acres on the banks of the waterway are open to the public.

"Most people don't know it's there and available," Castle said. "They drive over the bridge and have no idea they can go down there."

Castle said the idea of improving the canal zone, which is owned by the Army Corps of Engineers, was brought to him by Delaware state legislators Wayne Smith and Robert Vallihura.

Director of Delaware Greenways, Tim Plemmons said turning the canal zone into a major recreation area would be a

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ARMY CORPS

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coup for his organization, which is dedicated to preserving open space.

"Rights of way for these types of uses are difficult to come by," he said. "Once they're gone, they're gone forever."

Many other local politicians and environmental groups are behind the idea and last Thursday, a critical organization of all announced its support — the Army Corps of Engineers.

Taking a boat ride Thursday afternoon with Castle were Lt. Col. Robert Ruch, Commander of the Army Corp of Engineers Philadelphia District Office and Department of Natural Resources and Environmental control Secretary John Hughes.

Ruch said the Corps is supportive of Castle's idea, and will work with the state of Delaware and New Castle County to create a "scope of work" that would lay out the basic elements

of the recreation area. This winter, the Corps will hold public meetings to gather input from local residents, he said.

Castle said \$150,000 for a formal study will be provided by the federal government if next year's Energy and Water Appropriations Bill passes intact through congress.

As for the work itself, Castle said it would be paid for half by the feds and half by local sources. Just don't expect work to begin anytime soon. The study could take up to two years.

"When I get a hold of an idea and I like it, I like to move fast," Castle said. "But the government is slow."

Part of the study's purpose is to determine how the canal's different uses will coexist. The banks of the canal and a few fishing piers are currently used for biking, walking, jogging and fishing. Farther inland, DNREC allows hunting.

Rob Hessler, DNREC's Fish and Wildlife Regional Manager for New Castle

County, said there is enough space for everyone.

"The most important thing is to get down and think about it all, and it all can be accommodated," he said.